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HENRY FIELDING, CRITIC

The attitude of the average reader of Fielding is not unlike that of Minos, Judge of the Dead, in a conversation which Fielding, in "A Journey from this World to the Next," relates as having taken place between that dread personage and a spirit applying for admittance to Elysium, who told the judge he believed his works would speak for him. "'What works?' answered Minos. 'My dramatic works,' replied the other, 'which have done so much good in recommending virtue and punishing vice.' 'Very well,' said the judge, 'if you please to stand by, the first person who passes the gate by your means shall carry you in with him; but if you will take my advice, I think, for expedition sake, you had better return and live another life upon earth.' The bard grumbled at this, and replied, that besides his poetical works, he had done some other good things: for that he had once lent the whole profits of a benefit-night to a friend, and by that means had saved him and his family from destruction. Upon this the gate flew open, and Minos desired him to walk in, telling him, if he had mentioned this at first, he might have spared the remembrance of his plays."

The "other good things" which Fielding himself did have saved him, too; and "for expedition sake" as well as for virtue's sake the world is generally quite willing to spare the remembrance of his plays, and to admit the author into its affections because of his abiding goodness of heart and his deep-veined humanity. But these twenty-five plays with their prefaces, dedications, and prologues, although little read to-day and, as compared with the novels, forming a negligible part of Fielding's work, reveal, along with the volume of journals and essays — not to mention the utterances of the Westminster justice of the peace — a censor and critic of no inconsiderable power. To these productions, written in the sanguine years when the young man had faith in satire as an instrument of reform, we must turn for an understanding of his attitude towards contemporary and preceding dramatists. For his more general

critical opinions, the maturer utterances in the prefatory chapters to the various 'books' of Tom Jones are to be consulted. But before considering these general views and before pointing out specifically the drift of Fielding's criticism of dramatic conditions in his own time and the traditions which gave rise to them, it may be well to recall for a moment just what these conditions were when Fielding went up to London to seek his fortune.

The second quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of low level in the drama. The old forms were virtually played out: nobody took them seriously. They held the boards by grace of inheritance and traditional good will. The old 'wit-trap' comedy of Wycherley, Congreve, and Vanbrugh had fallen upon days when the artificial subtleties of Restoration manners had given way to a more realistic dramatic utterance reflecting the feelings of the larger body of English society. The sentimental and ethical elements — often somewhat maudlin and rather painfully didactic, to be sure, but none the less significant as voicing a revolt — were manifest in Steele and Lillo. The middle class was beginning to take stock in theatrical matters, for so long a monopoly of the court circle, and the newer comedy was adapted to bourgeois taste. So far as the old comedy held its own, it was mainly by sufferance. And this was all the more so of the Heroic Drama, which to this new generation was ridiculously unreal with its rant and fustian.

Against all this inherited mass of Restoration foolery the saner common-sense of the Georgian period with its nascent commercialism and humanitarianism revolted. As usual in times of reaction, conditions became somewhat chaotic — the older forms persisted by the side of the new native product and the importations from France and Italy. Adaptations from Shakespeare and the later Elizabethans together with imitations of the Restoration comedy held the stage whenever Italian opera and the puppet-shows permitted. Add to this the large number of farces and burlesques hitting off local extravagances and picturesque personalities of the day cleverly acted and loudly applauded — and you get the dramatic *mélange* into which young Fielding happened. It was a time of poor plays and clever

acting, the days of Cibber's decline and Garrick's rising glory. There was distinctly an eddy in the dramatic current which did not flow smoothly on again till the days of Goldsmith and Sheridan.

Henry Fielding brought to his work a mind well trained in the classics, an acquaintance with French literature of the Louis XIV period, with Cervantes, with Shakespeare, and with the writers of the Restoration Drama. Indeed, he had read, not as a critical scholar but as a man of the world with his eyes on life, the best known writers of ancient and modern times. Endowed with high natural spirits and irrepressible animal vigor, he threw himself into life with an immense gusto. The perfect abandon of those earlier years of apprenticeship is nowhere more fully shown than in the plays which he dashed off while he was learning the town, trying all sorts of hack-work, organizing theatrical companies, studying law, and doing in general a variety of 'low' things to make the thoughtless laugh and the judicious grieve.

A foe to all kinds of affectation, social and literary, he entered with enthusiasm into the conflict between decadent forces in which survived the spirit of the seventeenth century drama popularized by an element of foreign vaudeville, and the newer movement for a more realistic middle-class drama with its sentimental and ethical vein. Beginning his dramatic career as an imitator of Congreve, he soon deserted his model for a species of composition in which he could more directly satirize not only the dramatic but also the political abuses of the day. In this short burlesque farce Fielding attacked the old Restoration tragedy or current politics, but notwithstanding the professedly moral purpose of his plays, neither his own nor later times have taken him seriously as a preacher of righteousness.

While Fielding's genius was essentially dramatic in the broader sense, his wit was too clumsy for success in the Congrevian comedy, his sense of realism too keen for success in romantic drama, and his humor too riotously satirical for sustained achievement in sentimental and ethical performances such as Steele's. Fielding lacked deftness of touch; the flesh always got the better of the spirit, and he spoiled his dramatic

economy by a kind of riotous mental life which reflected his normal physical state. So it has come about that he is remembered not as a dramatist, but as a rather rollicking censor of the follies of his own and preceding generations in two or three quite clever dramatic extravaganzas wherein he has pilloried several literary, theatrical, and political worthies—John Dryden, Colley Cibber, Robert Walpole—for the amusement and professed betterment of his own time.

Fielding addressed no select audience of learned aristocrats; to him 'human nature' did not mean court nature with its set conventions, but rather the free man nearer to nature in the country than in the city. Entertaining such a view he naturally did not sympathize with those old-fashioned critics of his day who were constantly in dread of the introduction of a low element into literature. Out of this essentially democratic attitude of mind comes his notion of an author's relation to the public: "An author ought to consider himself not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money. . . . The provision, then, which we have here made, is no other than Human Nature."

The three prime qualifications of authorship, according to Fielding, are Genius, Learning, and Experience. Without these no man can treat adequately of Human Nature:—Genius, "the gift of heaven" to be nourished by art; Learning, to correct and restrain; and Experience, to assure fidelity to human life. Fielding invokes Experience as the most vital of the three: "Experience long conversant with the wise, the good, the learned, and the polite; nor with them only, but with every kind of character, from the minister at his levee, to the bailiff in his sponging-house; from the duchess at her drum, to the landlady behind her bar. From these only can the manners of mankind be known; to which the recluse pedant, however great his parts or extensive his learning may be, has ever been a stranger."

Nature must be copied at first hand, and that means a knowledge of the world, Fielding would say, which is gained only by conversation: "The manners of every rank must be seen in order to be known." He disliked the slavish imitation of

models in the pseudo-classic fashion. Characters thus drawn, he says, "are only the faint copy of a copy, and can have neither the justness nor spirit of an original." *Back to Nature!* is Fielding's cry: "No author ought to write anything but dictionaries and spelling-books who has not the privilege of admission behind the scenes of this great theatre of Nature."

For the neo-classical fetich, *The Laws of the Three Unities*, Fielding has as little respect as he shows for decorum or the time-honored five-act division of a play:

"Who ever demanded the reasons of that nice unity of time or place which is now established to be so essential to dramatic poetry? What critic has ever been asked, Why a play may not contain two days as well as one? or why the audience may not be wafted fifty miles as well as five? Has any commentator well accounted for the limitation which an ancient critic has set to the drama, which he will have contain neither more nor less than five acts? or has any one living attempted to explain what the modern judges of our theatre mean by that word Low; by which they have happily succeeded in banishing all humor from the stage and have made the theatre as dull as a drawing room? It is difficult to conceive that any one should have had enough of impudence to lay down dogmatical rules in any art or science without the least foundation."

This attack on the 'rules' leads Fielding into a discussion of the evolution and duties of a critic. He goes on to say (and we fancy he is thinking of his own critics) that at first the critic was a mere clerk transcribing the rules laid down by great judges whose vast productive genius gave them the right to make laws which they themselves had intuitively exemplified. In those times the critic was humble, a simple interpreter of genius. "But in process of time and in ages of ignorance the clerk began to invade the power and assume the dignity of his master; the laws of writing were no longer founded on the practice of the author, but on the dictates of the critic: the clerk became the legislator, and those very peremptorily gave laws whose business it was at first only to transcribe them." Naturally these shallow dictators soon mistook mere form for substance, following the letter of the law instead of the spirit.

All this resulted in the magnifying into essentials of certain accidentals in great writers, which time and ignorance made to constitute their chief merits. To curb or restrain genius in such a manner is like asserting that man can dance best in chains. And so, Fielding concludes, critics have been unduly complimented by the world as being men of much greater profundity than they really are.

Boileau had followed the ancients because their laws were founded on common-sense, nature, and reason. And later on, Lessing, a younger contemporary of Fielding, brushing aside modern accretions, especially French accretions, went back Luther-fashion to the original text-book of his literary faith. It would, however, be too much to say that Fielding had any notion of returning to the ancients for any *modus scribendi*. The ancients are all very well, he would say, and I have learned a great deal from them and I have great respect for them, but as to their hard-and-fast rules of making plays and other fiction—well, as Molière has remarked on more than one occasion, *nous avons changé tout cela*. The ancients had their boat, Fielding had his: *Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?* Indeed, Fielding was too “fond of his pipe and shirt-sleeves,” as Sir Leslie Stephen puts it, to be very classically decorous, his sense of humor too regnant to promote polite behavior with the gods and goddesses, with whom he delights to play all sorts of odd tricks. The realism among the ancients he found and admired; the rest he left alone to logic-choppers of the Chapelain type, while for consistent English classicists like Rymer the “judicious” he had the same ironical disdain as for the sentimental preacher of virtue-for-revenue whose *Pamela* moved him to Homeric laughter.

One “new vein of knowledge” Fielding claimed to have discovered, or at least to have used first: “This vein is no other than contrast which runs through all the works of creation, and may probably have a large share in constituting in us the idea of all beauty, as well natural as artificial.” On this principle he defends the use of prefatory chapters in *Tom Jones*, “soporific parts or so many serious scenes artfully interwoven, in order to contrast and set off the rest.” And this “soporific” injection,

by the way, reminds us of Pope's line— "Sleepless himself to give his readers sleep."

But, after all, such use of contrast was not entirely new; for Fielding's readers, if there was any Parson Adams or Dr. Harrison among them, perhaps felt in these prolegomena a reminiscence of the Greek chorus rather whimsically transformed into a little prose commentary.

After Fielding's caustic remarks on critics in general and his insistence on experience among all sorts and conditions of men as essential to vital authorship, it is interesting to know what critics he mentions most and how far his admiration for them goes. It must be understood, however, that the attack already mentioned was, for the most part, on contemporary critics who, as Fielding seemed to think, had banded together to damn his productions, and that without having taken the trouble to read them. Their use of the monosyllable 'low' particularly offended him, a word, as he somewhere remarks, "which becomes the mouth of no critic who is not right honourable." Against these indiscriminating critics his anger is never appeased. But there is a noble group of critics to whose labors Fielding declares the commonwealth of letters to be greatly indebted: "Such were Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, among the ancients; Dacier and Bossu among the French; and some perhaps among us, who have certainly been duly authorized to execute at least a judicial authority *in foro literario*."

That pronouncement has a pseudo-classical sound, but it is to be noted what influential names are omitted in the mention of French critics; and it is also noteworthy how cautiously and tentatively Fielding refers to English critics. So far as I can recall, he nowhere refers to the critical opinions of Dryden, who doubtless stood in Fielding's mind as the chief exponent of a very absurd species of tragedy. For Pope he seems to have had considerable regard, due perhaps to Pope's Horatian "Essay on Criticism" and his translation of Fielding's favorite ancient poet, Homer. Doubtless his liking for the Dacier name may be explained through Mme. Dacier's strong Homeric sympathies; for in the account of that famous Sappho-Orpheus concert which Fielding attended in Elysium he found Mme. Dacier

sitting in Homer's lap and Pope standing by the poet's side. Moreover, Pope's and Swift's warfare on the pedants of their day somewhat endeared these two men to Fielding, who disliked pedantry as much as Molière. Certainly it is difficult to see what affinity Fielding had for Le Bossu with his ultra didacticism, that element which Fielding so strongly objected to in Steele's plays. Fielding's utterance about this "noble group" of critics is in the main the traditional one. Of Aristotle he speaks in one place somewhat slightly; Horace's common-sense pleased him; but for Longinus he several times expresses genuine admiration. Longinus may therefore be regarded as his favorite among ancient critics. It is somewhat strange that he makes no mention of Boileau, who was not unlike Fielding in his insistence on Common-sense as the steady quality of genius.

Towards the Rules Fielding was supremely indifferent, too indifferent ever to attack them very specifically, for into the polemics of criticism he did not enter. For pedantry and all forms of hypocrisy he had infinite sarcasm, and for human frailty tolerant sympathy. In this larger view of Human Nature he links himself through a sense of relativity in history and life with Saint-Évremond, Bayle, and Molière, but of all these he is most akin in temperament and expression to Molière. Fielding, then, is a naturalist as opposed to the dogmatists and sentimentalists of the eighteenth century.

So much for the general critical opinions of Fielding. We turn now to consider his attitude towards the Drama of his own and Restoration times. But, first, a few words on Fielding's regard for Shakespeare and Ben Jonson and his relation to the Molière comedy will make clearer the criticism of Fielding on his own contemporaries. In Shakespeare he found no wild and irregular genius, but the sanest of mortals, who searchingly read the human heart; and his anger was hot against those who cut and slashed the master's plays to suit their own little ideas of dramatic propriety, while he laughed at quibbling commentators who darkened counsel with words without knowledge. There is some delightful irony in that little scene in *Elysium* where Fielding represents Shakespeare as standing silent between

Betterton and Booth while the discussion waxes warm about the placing of an accent in one of his famous lines. At last being appealed to, the poet replied: "Faith, gentlemen, it is so long since I wrote the line, I have forgot my meaning. This I know, could I have dreamt so much nonsense would have been talked and writ about it, I would have blotted it out of my works; for I am sure, if any of these be my meaning, it doth me very little honor." And so to inquiries on other ambiguities Shakespeare said with some warmth: "I marvel at nothing so much as that men will gird themselves at discovering obscure beauties in an author. Certes the greatest and most pregnant beauties are ever the plainest and most evidently striking: and when two meanings of a passage can in the least balance our judgments which to prefer, I hold it matter of unquestionable certainty that neither of them is worth a farthing."

Fielding had a great liking for Ben Jonson, quite natural in view of the kinship of their temperaments in several particulars. Fielding had a keen eye for 'humours,' too, besides the ability to devise telling situations. Both were classically trained, and in both flowed a deep current of satire. But Fielding was less dogmatic than Jonson and more of a naturalist. Neither could write romantic drama or skillfully work out a tragedy until it became a human document.

To Molière more than to any other writer of plays, it seems to me, was Fielding related in his nature and outlook on life. Both attacked in one way or another the worship of the neo-classic and pseudo-classic rules, both warred on pedantry, both fought all pretensions whether private or public and satirized abuses, both had a feeling for appreciative criticism; both, in a word, were naturalists and practically impressionistic in their criticism. Fielding had more respect for the ancients than Molière and more regard for learning, considering other qualifications necessary for the critic than the ordinary accomplishments of the well-bred man of the world. Fielding does not, in general, appear to be so radical a critic as Molière. In their broad humanity, at times almost descending into buffoonery, much to the disgust of stately sticklers for classic decorum, they belong to that type of genius which is at the same time the

wisest and most human. Though lacking the subtle and delicate wit of the French dramatist, Fielding touched him in temperament and best knew how to interpret him to his own time. And this he did in adaptations, almost amounting to translations, of at least two of Molière's plays, while he reflected Molière's influence in many burlesque farces. All these pieces, indeed, both in their avowed purpose and informing spirit reveal a genius for adaptation possible only when the translator is related in taste and temperament to the original author.

Fielding's criticism of dramatic conditions from the Restoration to the middle of the eighteenth century may be summed up under three heads: (1) Ridicule of the so-called Heroic Drama of Dryden, Lee, Rowe, Addison, Young, Thomson, and Phillips; (2) A protest against adaptations of Shakespeare; (3) Attacks on Italian and French importations.

The stiff formality and inflated bombast of the Restoration tragedy had been carefully imitated in Fielding's day until rant and fustian came to be regarded as essentially the style for serious plays. Fielding and others were full of sincere laughter and good-natured contempt at this species of dramatic fraud. Not only had tragic writing utterly departed from nature, but tragic acting too had an utterance all its own, neither human nor divine, though there was much fine talk about the gods and fate. To burlesque this fantastic dramatic form, a relic of the courtly artificial stage, Fielding in 1731 wrote *Tom Thumb*, or with its full title—*The Tragedy of Tragedies; or, the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*; and in 1732 *The Covent Garden Tragedy*, intended as a satire on Ambrose Phillips's *Distressed Mother*, which was a popular adaptation of Racine's *Andromaque*.

The long preface by "H. Scriblerus Secundus" prefixed to *Tom Thumb* contains much pedantic quotation from Aristotle, Horace, Cicero, and other ancient worthies in the Bentley fashion to show how well the tragedy of *Tom Thumb* conforms in technique and utterance to ancient and modern canons. The Aristotelian division of the play into Fable, Moral, Characters, Sentiments, and Diction is applied to *Tom Thumb*, the Moral of which is explained to be "that human happiness is exceedingly transient, and that death is the certain end of all men: the

former whereof is inculcated by the fatal end of Tom Thumb; the latter by that of all the other personages." As to Diction: "That the greatest perfection of the language of a tragedy is, that it is not to be understood; which granted (as I think it must be), it will necessarily follow that the only way to avoid this is by being too high or too low for the understanding which will comprehend everything within its reach."

Horace is quoted to prove "that bombast is the proper language for joy and doggerel for grief" (!). And, finally, Cicero's famous "*Quid est tam furiosum vel tragicum quam sonitus inanis, nulla subjecta sententia neque scientia?*" is happily rendered: "What can be so proper for tragedy as a set of big-sounding words, so contrived together as to convey no meaning?"

The Covent Garden Tragedy is also preceded by a long preface in which Fielding ironically analyzes the play with the following definition of tragedy as a basis: "A tragedy is a thing of five acts, written dialogue-wise, consisting of several fine similes, metaphors, and moral phrases, with here and there a speech upon liberty. It must contain an action, characters, sentiments, diction, and a moral." He goes on to show, after the manner of his own critics, that this play has none of these, and is, in general, very 'low.'

But other burlesques besides Fielding's were appearing, for the antics of the stock tragedy-actors before high heaven had made the old Heroic Drama a subject for infinite jest. Carey's *Chrononhotonthologos* is perhaps the most famous of these. Such lines as the following are quite in the *Tom Thumb* manner:—

Go call a coach, and let a coach be called,
And let the man that calls it be the caller,
And in his calling let him nothing call
But coach! coach! coach! Oh, for a coach, ye gods!

Better still is the scene where the warrior, having ascended to heaven on the piled-up bodies of the slain, refuses an invitation from the gods to enter as a reward for his heroic deeds because he is summoned to earth by the eyes of his mistress. Such strokes of humor as these of Fielding and Carey demolished the tottering structure of pseudo-tragedy.

Colley Cibber, poet-laureate, actor, and playwright, came in

for the largest share of Fielding's satire against Shakespeare—profanation, as Fielding regarded the doing-over of the master's plays. Against Cibber, it will be recalled, there already existed a personal grudge because of a quarrel about theatrical companies, a circumstance which added gall to Fielding's attacks. The laureate's bad grammar in his famous *Apology* together with his carpentering of Shakespeare tragedy to fit the stage of his own playhouse moved Fielding to make some caustic remarks on that melodramatic personage. For the first offence Cibber (who had, moreover, referred to Fielding in the *Apology* as a "broken wit") was vigorously criticised in *The Champion* and then subjected to a mock-trial for murdering the English language "with a certain weapon called a goose-quill." Another *jeu d'esprit* against Cibber is found in *Pasquin*, a play full of Fielding's personal raillery of political opponents. This time sport is made of Cibber's inferior poetic ability. One of the court candidates, who has various offices at his disposal, asks a certain voter what he would like.

Voter.—I own I should like the cellar, for I am a devilish lover of sack.

Lord Place.—Sack, say you? Odso! You shall be Poet-Laureate.

Voter.—No, my Lord: I am no poet; I can't make verses.

Lord P.—No matter for that, you will be able to make odes.

Voter.—Odes, my Lord! what are those?

Lord P.—Faith, sir, I can't tell what they are, but I know you may be qualified for the place without being a poet.

In another place Fielding had criticised Cibber for prefixing so much Latin and Greek to his plays, as if he were profoundly learned in the classics and by implication in the oriental tongues as well! "I myself heard a gentleman reading one of his odes cry out, 'Why, this is all Hebrew!'"

But the most serious charge against Colley Cibber was that he made a business of mangling Shakespeare. For this sin he is introduced in *The Historical Register*, Fielding's political drama, under the name of *Ground-Ivy* in a dialogue with Apollo:

[*Enter Ground-Ivy.*]

Ground Ivy.—What are you doing here?

Apollo.—I am casting the parts in the tragedy of King John.

Ground I.—Then you are casting the parts in a tragedy that won't do.

Apollo.—How, Sir! Was it not written by Shakespeare? And was not Shakespeare one of the greatest geniuses that ever lived?

Ground I.—No, Sir; Shakespeare was a pretty fellow, and said some things which only want a little of my licking to do well enough; King John as now writ will not do. But a word in your ear—I will make him.

Apollo.—How?

Ground I.—By alteration, Sir: it was a maxim of mine when I was at the head of theatrical affairs, that no play, tho' ever so good, would do without alteration.

The immediate occasion, however, of this attack, it may be remembered, was a recent production of Cibber's ridiculous version of *King John* under the name of *Papal Tyranny*.

Garrick's successful attempt to restore Shakespeare to the stage in his correct form delighted Fielding's soul. So indignant was he at any tampering with the master's words that even the conscientious efforts of rather dull commentators to be certain of the dramatists' meaning brought forth a volley of execrations on their devoted heads.

It is, however, in his attack on the degenerate taste which welcomed the motley crowd of French and Italian opera-singers, dancers, tumblers, and jugglers upon the English stage that Fielding fairly revels in invectives. The decadent patriotism which would lead his countrymen to neglect the legitimate drama of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar for these foreign frivolities, is held up to scorn with the zeal of a reformer who protests so much as to cause a suspicion that he himself was smarting from personal neglect. The fact is, some of his own dramas are no better than the entertainments he satirizes; and the only circumstance which saves him from the accusation of having introduced an operatic element in his own plays to catch the popular taste, is the adapting of the numerous songs to native airs.

In the prologue to *The Universal Gallant* he pleads with the public for a share of their favor in what he elsewhere calls "this Gothic leaden age:"

But if our strokes be general and nice,
If tenderly we laugh you out of vice,
Do not your native entertainments leave;
Let us at least our share of smiles receive,
Nor, while you censure us, keep all your boons
For soft *Italian* airs, and *French* buffoons.

In "An Epistle to Mrs. Clive" prefixed to *The Intriguing Chambermaid*, Fielding laments the tendency of the time "to sacrifice our own native entertainments to a wanton affected fondness for foreign music; when our nobility seem eagerly to rival each other in distinguishing themselves in favor of Italian theatres, and in neglect of our own."

It is hardly likely that Fielding looked with complacency upon the success of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, that clever imitation of a foreign fashion that in one form or another has long ago become thoroughly domesticated.

John Rich, whom Fielding so soundly berated in *The Champion* as the great machinist of puppet shows, was satirized in the unsuccessful extravaganza *Tumble-down Dick*; or *Phaeton in the Suds*, another mock-classic performance burlesquing the pantomimes and spectacles then in vogue. But these comic diatribes seem not to have had any perceptible effect on the popular craze for spectacular entertainment; and before long Henry Fielding quitted the rôle of dramatic reformer for that of a painter of human nature in fresher fields.

The drift of all this protest against degrading foreign elements in the native drama may be found in one of the songs in *Don Quixote in England*, that odd attempt to anglicize Fielding's favorite Cervantesian hero:

When mighty roast beef was the Englishman's food,
It ennobled our hearts and enriched our blood;
Our soldiers were brave and our courtiers good:
Then, Britons, from all nice dainties refrain,
Which effeminate Italy, France, and Spain;
And mighty roast beef shall command on the main.

And the delightful irony about this patriotic outburst is that it occurs in the midst of an imitation of a foreign classic for home entertainment! Such is the humorous inconsistency of this very human critic.

Fielding's patriotic zeal for purging the national stage of low foreign stuff and for purifying politics by exposing the glaring abuses of the Walpole government being chilled by the interference of Sir Robert himself after the presentation of *Pasquin* and *The Historical Register*, the caustic young reformer dis-

banded his motley Haymarket company and turned to the study of the law. Indeed, it was time that a dose of legal tonic should be administered to a patient suffering from a species of emotional orgy into which, both by temperament and association he, like Tom Jones, was periodically in danger of lapsing. The fact is, Fielding's sympathies sometimes interfered with his critical judgments. For sincerity of temperament and really virtuous utterance, however, he had the appreciative enthusiasm of a Romantic critic; praise in such cases was a genuine delight to him. As an example of this may be cited his tribute to George Lillo's *Fatal Curiosity*, which, he says, "is inferior only to Shakespeare's best pieces." A remarkable utterance truly about so commonplace a sentimentalist as the author of *George Barnwell*. But Lillo's simplicity of appeal together with his philanthropical life found in Henry Fielding an enthusiastic response.

Moreover, it must be remembered in any estimate of Fielding the Critic that he professed a distinctly moral purpose along with entertainment in much of his own writing. Thus in *The Covent Garden Journal*:—"Writers are not, I presume, to be considered as mere jack-puddings whose business it is only to excite laughter; this, indeed, may sometimes be intermixed, and served up with graver matters, in order to titillate the palate, and to recommend wholesome food to the mind. . . . When wit and humour are introduced for such good purposes, when the agreeable is blended with the useful, then is the writer said to have succeeded in every point; . . . but when no moral, no lesson, no instruction, is conveyed to the reader, where the whole design of the composition is no more than to make us laugh, the writer comes very near to the character of a buffoon.

"When we are employed in reading a great and good author, we ought to consider ourselves as searching after treasures, which, if well and regularly laid up in the mind, will be of use to us on sundry occasions in our lives."

Certainly Dr. Johnson himself, who called Fielding a "black-guard" and very "low" at that, could not have objected to such didactic pabulum as this; and Samuel Richardson, who told

Sarah Fielding that he was "equally surprised and concerned" at her brother's "continual lowness," would have agreed with such virtuous declarations. But the truth is, Henry Fielding is never at his best as a preacher of moral purpose in literature, or he would not have created so much good literature. His practice is vastly better than his theory, and his very human frailty is his saving grace.

Nowhere is Fielding's keen observant wit better displayed than in *A Modern Glossary* (*Covent Garden Journal*, No. 4) where he exposes in one-line definitions the social and literary affectations of the day. "*Critic*, like *homo*, is a name common to all the human race." Fielding speaks feelingly. "*Humour*—Scandalous lies, tumbling and dancing on the rope." "*Knowledge*—In general, means knowledge of the town; as this is, indeed, the only kind of knowledge ever spoken of in the polite world." A hit at the old "human-nature critics." "*Learning*—pedantry." "*Patriot*—A candidate for a place at court." "*Politics*—The art of getting such a place." "*Taste*—The present whim of the town, whatever it be." "*Wit*—Profaneness, indecency, immorality, scurrility, mimicry, buffoonery. Abuse of all good men and especially of the clergy."

To the later school of French critics who preach the gospel of heredity, climate, and environment, Henry Fielding is troublesome. He cannot be "accounted for" scientifically and labeled "product," because he was too whimsically human and individual. So Taine reads him a lecture on indecorum, calls him and Tom and the rest amiable buffaloes, and concludes, with a shoulder-shrug, that he is the right kind of hero for a nation named John Bull! Indeed, this type of hero must have been powerful and formidable to the law and order critics who were hunting for regularity and conformity. "Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist," said Emerson, and Fielding has had his lashing for non-conformity; for he was a giant Realist full of mad freaks and daring gymnastics, mighty protagonist in a Human Comedy where men of blood wrestled with anemic folk of Restoration traditions.

Fielding brought English criticism back to nature and common-sense, after its captivity in the box-tree walks of the

pseudo-classical garden. Out of this trim park of withering exotics he with laughter rather than with song led his people into the open fields. He knew the town, and he knew the average man. Who in the eighteenth century, Whitman-like, wrote so heartily —

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action formed under laws divine,
The Modern Man?

A pioneer, then, was Fielding, of modern realistic and appreciative criticism, experimentally knowing many sides of human life, and daring as he himself said,—

To view and judge and speak men as they are.

And yet his sense of relativity was hardly more than nascent as compared with the efflorescence of that sense in our day. Besides, his brain was so traced over with classical imagery that somehow there got into his plays a fantastic blending of the old and new — an English tavern atmosphere chilled by a breath from the twilight regions of the ancient gods. Men, indeed, he knew better than books, even better than his law-books; but the books that saved him from classicism were those healthy life-preservers, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Molière. His deep knowledge of human nature was, after all has been said, his best equipment as a critic; for his criticism, while not always original, is in the main refreshingly vital.

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